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AUTHOR Reyhner, Jon

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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes ways to help young American Indian and Alaska Native children become fluent readers. There are numerous reading intervention programs, each with its own set of claims and counter-claims. Phonics approaches are designed for standard English speakers, and students with limited English abilities end up parroting what they read without comprehension. A major criticism of basal readers and research-based reading programs is that the material is chosen for a generic American audience with few, if any, stories that relate to Indian culture. The language experience approach uses words from students' oral vocabularies, familiar stories, community oral histories, and predictable books to teach reading lessons. The whole-language approach is compatible with Native beliefs and traditional teaching methods, but its lack of structure can overwhelm teachers. Balanced approaches draw on both phonics and whole-language methods. In balanced approaches, teachers can supplement basal readers with community and tribal reading materials. Using materials written in students' Native language improves reading skills in the Native language and English, and attitudes towards school. Parents can help their children by reading to them. Teachers should use reading materials that relate to children's lives and provide opportunities to learn new words and practice oral language in English and in their Native language. (Contains 19 references.)

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Jon Reyhner

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Teaching Reading to American Indian/Alaska Native Students

Jon Reyhner

This Digest summarizes ways to help young American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children become fluent readers—an essential skill if they are to succeed in school. The extent of the AI/AN reading problem is indicated by *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading 2000* (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001), which found only 43 percent of American Indians reading at or above a basic level versus 73 percent of White students.

Teachers looking for ways to help students improve their reading are faced with conflicting advice from the experts. Some recommend emphasizing *phonics* while others promote a *whole language* approach. Phonics advocates ground their approach in behaviorist learning theory and support their claims about its effectiveness by pointing to comparison studies; likewise, whole language advocates ground their approach in constructivist learning theory and base their claims on ethnographic classroom studies (Chall, 2000; McQuillan, 1998). In between the phonics and whole language camps, and often criticized by both, are advocates of a *balanced approach*, drawing methodology from both sides.

Complicating the choice of instructional approach is the fact that AI/AN children often speak different dialects of English or, in some cases, they come to school speaking only their Native language. Speaking in an Indian English dialect can limit the number of words children can decode using traditional phonics approaches, which are designed for standard English speakers. Students taught to decode words that are not in their oral vocabulary end up parroting what they read without comprehension (St. Charles & Costantino, 2000).

While early reading experiences can depend on learning how letters in words relate to sounds (phonemic awareness) and how to pronounce those sounds, students who later continue to focus on these sounds become poor readers. At around the third grade, *learning to read* shifts to developing competency in *reading to learn. The Nation's Report Card* cited earlier indicates that the majority of AI/AN students may be having difficulty making that transition.

Packaged Reading Programs

For over a century, the main way to teach reading in the United States has been through the use of graded sets of relatively easy-to-use reading textbooks called *basal readers*. These textbooks typically include literature anthologies with instructional activities. Responding to the reading controversy and other market demands, basal publishers in recent years have added more multicultural content, systematic phonics, and popular and classic "authentic" children's literature.

Besides basal readers, there are other widely marketed *research-based reading programs*. One gaining popularity is *Success for All*, described by its proponents as especially appropriate for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Recently, however, critics have marshaled evidence that casts doubt on developers' claims (Pogrow, 2000). This is a fairly common phenomenon in the reading debates. The same sorts of claims and counter-claims have been made about other reading intervention programs.

It may be that any program that spends extra time and money on reading will tend to have positive results. The downside can be that less time and money are available for teaching other subjects. Also, promoters of new programs tend to evaluate them with tests that focus on the particular skills their programs teach, and students usually show good progress, especially early on. However, results tend to be less positive on more general standardized achievement tests, and, while students do better, they usually don't catch up with national averages.

One of the major criticisms of basal readers and programs like *Success for All* is that the reading material is chosen for a generic American audience with few, if any, stories that relate to the diverse experiential and cultural heritages of AI/AN children. Further, phonics programs tend to presume that the students know and speak the sound system of standard English.

Language Experience Approach

An alternative method of teaching beginning reading is the *language experience approach*. In this method, teachers write down the actual words students use on a chalk board or piece of chart paper, often after the students have participated in some kind of activity. These "stories" are then used to teach phonics, vocabulary, and grammar. Using the language experience approach can ensure that the words the students decode are in their oral vocabulary, often not the case with commercial materials. Sylvia Ashton Warner, a pioneer of the language experience approach, emphasized using words with deep personal meaning for her students. Using students' names, familiar stories, community oral histories, word games, big books, and predictable books to teach reading lessons can be more effective than using materials found in many commercial reading programs (Reyhner & Cockrum, 2001).

Whole Language Approach

Kasten (1992) has argued that "whole language philosophy is compatible with many common Native American beliefs and with the way in which American Indian children are typically taught and socialized in their home environment" (p. 108). Her conclusion is supported by Oglala Sioux educator Sandra Fox who calls it the "Indian way" of teaching (p. 118). However, Fox takes a balanced approach that includes an emphasis on "reading strategy instruction on pronunciation, comprehension, [and] critical thinking" (1992, p. 168).

McCarty (1993) describes how at Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first Indian-controlled school in modern times, "basic skills routines produced Navajo students with near-perfect English diction, but with little comprehension of oral English or text" (p. 183). However, by using "contextualized reading strategies and a cooperative learning center system" developed by the Hawaiian Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), "rich, bilingual print environments have been constructed as classroom walls, school hallways, and ceilings display students' research hypotheses and findings, their creative writing, and their artistic work." This was done by "focusing classroom inquiry on interests and themes generated by the students themselves" (p. 185).

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In addition, teachers can help students understand academic content better if they integrate different subject matter into thematic units that are connected to the social and physical environments in which their students live (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

Helping Teachers Teach

A key issue in any reading approach is how structured it is. Teachers need some structure, but too much structure limits their ability to adapt to the special needs of AI/AN students. Less structured methods such as the *whole language* approach can put a heavy burden on teachers to plan and organize, which can be overwhelming and can lead to chaotic classrooms. Some whole language teachers rely on the instructional scope and sequence in a basal teacher's guide to provide structure to their teaching.

In balanced approaches, teachers can use a specific basal or other reading program thoughtfully and supplement it with activities and reading materials related to the particular background, needs, and interests of their students. Ideally, readers would be available that featured elements of Indian students' culture and experiences. However, the practicalities of producing such a series are complicated by the presence of hundreds of tribes in the United States, which share some commonalties but are also very different from one another. Consequently, the more practical course is to seek community and tribal sources for reading materials to supplement commercial readers.

Cleary and Peacock (1998) report that some AI/AN students exhibit resistance to reading and writing because of continual correction of their attempts by teachers, comprehension problems resulting from English idioms and dialects, and the decontextualized nature of much classroom instruction. Reading materials should be chosen to develop students' AI/AN identities as well as introduce students to the wider world. For AI/AN students, it is particularly important to supplement any reading program with local stories they can relate to.

Embracing Literacy and Maintaining Identity

Centuries of experience with literacy helped produce a positive view of reading and education among people of European descent. Further, reading is central to Christianity because of the importance of Bible reading.

However, some Native Americans have negative attitudes towards literacy because of this very association with European "conquerors," Christian missionary efforts, and repressive Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding schools of the past. Native people who share this view see literacy as taking them away from their Indigenous oral culture and assimilating them into White society. However, it is mistaken to identify literacy exclusively with Europeans or Christians, as Mayans, Arabs, and Asians can point out.

If AI/AN students are to do well in school, their communities need to embrace literacy in English. Hopefully, they will support literacy in their Native language, as well. There is growing evidence that using curriculum materials written in students' Native language produces improved reading skills, in some cases in both the Native language and English (Markowitz & Haley, 1973), and improved attitudes toward school (Franks, 1988; Rudin, 1989; Radda, Iwamoto, & Patrick, 1998; Demmert, 2002).

The 2000 National Report Card on Reading indicated that fourth graders who watched less television, read more for fun, had more reading material in their homes, and talked more about reading with family and friends were better readers (Donahue et al., 2001). The best way for students to expand their vocabularies is by extensive reading. Efforts, such as *sustained silent reading*, that promote free voluntary reading in school give students the practice they need to become fluent readers with large vocabularies (Pilgreen, 2000). Unfortunately, those students who read less outside of school usually also read less in school and get fewer chances to visit libraries than do better readers (McQuillan, 1998).

Fox (2000) asserts that "reading to children is the single most important activity that parents can provide to help their children succeed in school" (p. 3). For teachers, she makes the following recommendations:

- Use reading materials that relate to children's lives, to help them understand that literature is experience written down and that it is interesting to read.
- Strengthen and expand children's language abilities by providing them many opportunities to have new experiences, to learn new words, and to practice oral language in English and in their Native language (p. 1).

Finally, it is important to note that traditional AI/AN stories contain sophisticated vocabulary and can be used to teach reading to students who come to school speaking their Native language. Stories can be read in English, as well. Students who learn to read in their Native language can transfer those skills to learning to read in English (Francis & Reyhner, in press).

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Jon Reyhner is an associate professor of education at Northern Arizona University where he teaches bilingual multicultural education courses.

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